WiFi in the Ivory Tower

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COME, PEOPLE, COME – *step into the forum and join our conversation about these new machines. All tribes are welcome.*

When most people use the term technology, they mean very complex machines, particularly computers. But I would contend that the best definition of technology recognizes a fundamental aspect of our common humanity – that we are tool-using creatures. In this sense, technology becomes anything people use as extensions of themselves to manifest themselves in the world, even to create entire new worlds. All linguistic and artistic expression is technology, as are cultural institutions, social practices, and, coming back to a more mainstream understanding of technology, all the material tools, gadgets, and machines we make to do what we need to do.

Technology is nothing new, nor is the debate over how useful or harmful it may be. In *Phaedrus*, Plato's dialogue from the fourth century BCE, Plato and his mentor Socrates turn their attention to the topic of writing, and Socrates tells the story of how the Egyptian god Theuth made a gift of writing to King Thamus. Theuth suggests that this wonderful new writing technology will be a tonic to memory, but King Thamus cheekily replies that nope, writing will serve to help in reminding people of what they should know, without really understanding it. Furthermore, says King Thamus, those who master the technology of writing will have only the appearance of wisdom, but not true wisdom. The problem writing presents in its "false

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Plato speaking with Sophocles.

wisdom" highlights the importance of the more legitimate path to wisdom, says Socrates: the dialectic – direct engagement with the minds of others in the real world. In effect, this newfangled technology of writing is going to be trouble.

One particularly clear presentation of the broad definition of technology comes from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his perspicacious 1950 essay, "The Question Concerning Technology." Not only is technology a much broader phenomenon than we typically assume, he writes, it is also useful to think of technology as a process. "Technology has an essence," Heidegger writes, "which is not the same as technology in the sense of machinery. We search for that and come up with the provisional definition of the essence of technology as instrumentality (of being a means to an end)... Searching deeper, we find instrumentality has at its core the concept of cause. We find, searching even deeper, that, at the core of cause, there is not something

like 'effecting,' but rather 'being-responsible-for-something.' In other words, technology's instrumentality brings something forth into unconcealment.... [I]t is a mode of revealing, a way in which truth happens." Technology extends and expands the world in a far more transformational way than we suspect.

This transformational view is presented by Marshall McLuhan in his 1964 work, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Even 50 years ago, McLuhan grasped the connective, convergent nature of electronic media, and he argued further that the information carried over such media was less relevant than the ways in which that medium changed our social and cultural relationships. The telegraph, for instance, might carry content of one sort or another, but what really matters is a message now travelled from New York to San Francisco in a matter of minutes and not days. All these extensions and enlargements of ourselves create tensions between those who seek connection and those who would avoid it.

"In the electric age," writes McLuhan, "when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we necessarily participate, in depth, in the consequences of our every action. It is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner... [L]iterate man, civilized man, tends to restrict and to separate functions, whereas tribal man has freely extended the form of his body to include the universe." I would substitute the word *scholastic* in the place of *literate* and *civilized*, and *tribal* is a fine term. So these days, it's the "aloof" scholastics versus the "engaged" tribals.

I grew up with computers. I was born in 1968, and a year later human beings not only walked on the moon, but the first message was sent over a network from one computer to another – from UCLA to Stanford, two letters: "LO." I learned to program on TRS-80s and Commodore

"Where are you coming from and where are you going to?"

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64s, wrote papers and designed newspaper pages on Macs and PCs, and created my own web pages in HoTMetaL. I've always been writing and teaching, and technology has always been an essential part of both. More often than not, though, I take it as a fundamental truth that far too many educators still think about technology as if they were backward-looking scholastics, not forward-looking tribals. As far as teaching is concerned, it sometimes seems there are just as many teachers running from the digital age as plunging into it. We're not that far from Socrates and Plato's dialectics when it comes to computers in the classroom.

Independent schools offer many wonderful educational benefits to their students. At the same time, there are often less directly stated dynamics at work in independent schools that create tensions with information technology. Private schools in general are perceived as being more safe from the "outside world," but information technology readily weakens the walls of the ivory tower. Also, in a traditional "sage-on-the-stage" classroom, much of the teacher's authority is centered on "holding" the information the students need for assessments, but information technology makes it harder and harder for teachers to keep their course materials under their control. Most schools have very good reasons for banning smart phones, and most of those schools find it almost impossible to enforce those bans. Information wants to be free, and free information empowers people.

Laptops and smart phones and search engines make more permeable the boundaries of any school, and, much more problematic for the scholastics, information tech alters the power dynamics between students and teachers. These changes have little to do with the subject matter taught, and everything to do with the varieties of institutional power. And if the scholastic elites hold too tightly to the power that doesn't flow in the old familiar channels, they may lose more and more relevance for the high-tech tribals who seek only to prepare themselves for the digital pluralism of the decades to come. Who knows what brilliant tribals might step into the forum when the scholastics finally do some remodeling of the ivory tower? ■

Mr. Hayes hosts a roundtable discussion during 11th grade American Studies class. Using the classroom as a technological device, face-to-face conversation allows students to communicate in ways that aren't possible with laptops and other digital devices.